

Discourses of Nation-State towards Constructing Floating

Subjects: A study of V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*

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Abstract

'Postcolonial' is a multifaceted and contentious term. To define it in universally acceptable terms is quite impossible because of the doubt and suspicion allied to this relatively new field of literary studies. The attempt of this paper is to study V. S. Naipaul's novel *Half a Life* to bring forth the underlining beliefs and ideologies responsible for the birth of postcolonial nation-states. The focus is also on understanding the effects of migration and immigration on personal relations. The present research paper attempts to foreground the miserable conditions of the lives of subaltern people at their own inherited land as well as on the foreign lands and their continuous struggle and hope of assimilation in the postcolonial nation-states. V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* deals with the themes of cultural conflicts, migration, rumination, globalization, multiculturalism, political struggles and hope of assimilation. Further this research paper will expose the gamut of issues including the multiple exclusion and distribution faced by postcolonial nation-states, threats of migration, loss of identity, globalization, and economic disparity.

In the postcolonial analysis, the term nation-state has been critiqued mainly because the postcolonial nation states experience multiple exclusions and unequal power distribution. This feeling of marginalisation and exclusion is voiced by many postcolonial writers who are concerned with the psychological effects of the political and economic-cultural structures of the postcolonial world. Many Indian writers in English, like, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapoor, Bharti Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy have penned down the harsh political, economic and psychological effects of postcolonialism. Ashok D. Mashale, in his article "The Postcolonial Perspectives in Indian English Novels" traces the history of Indian fiction in English.

The postcolonial Indian English fiction witnesses at least three generations of Indian novelists in English. The first generation consists mainly the prominent figures like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the second like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal and others enriched the fiction. But the third generation of writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, etc. established the fame in international arena. (32)

The postcolonial Indian writings in English have delineated Indian history and culture in different shades and from different perspectives. The rising nationalist consciousness often gives birth to the nation-states and provides new dimensions to the definitions of the term 'nation'; a concept which according to Anderson is an 'imagined' entity: "it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (7).

Benedict Anderson in his very influential book *Imagined Communities* takes note of the factors that led to the emergence of the idea of nation and sees nation as an 'imagined' rather than 'natural' community "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (7). Even the people of a community do not personally appreciate each other but unconsciously there is a bonding among the people belonging to a particular community. Saeed Saeed in Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* gives voice to such imagined communities when he asserts: "First I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will be American" (Desai 136). His introduction of himself as first a Muslim clearly states that even after his migration he imagines himself aligned to his own religious community. The image in the minds of people belonging to a particular community gives them a sense of unity even in diversity. Although people belong to different religions, castes, ethnicities, depending on the context and opposition, realize a sense of unity even in spite of diversity among them.

One gains national identity by the State or country in which s/he lives. Sometimes "Social organizations and social identities may be larger than the boundaries of states and may have power over them" (Hall. J 2). The state or its institutions may not be able to control all the social groups in its territory with equal authority. State can be seen as a self-governing political entity that is defined by particular geographical boundaries, shared history and a common culture. Nevertheless, the idea of the 'post-colonial' nation-state has become problematic and controversial. Still it is a significant way of defining political identity in the

contemporary world. Bill Ashcroft in his article “Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope” observes

The nation-state has been critiqued in post-colonial analysis largely because the post-independence, post colonized nation, that wonderful utopian idea, proved to be a focus of exclusion and division rather than unity; perpetuating the class divisions of the colonial state rather than liberating national subjects. (2)

Many postcolonial writers have portrayed native reality and Indian sensibility from the native perspective while others have done so as outsiders. The east-west encounter becomes prominent with diverse themes in the early Indian English fiction.

Postcolonial Indian English fiction often critiques the Indian society and its institutions. English is only the medium, the problems and issues often remain typically Indian. These writings undoubtedly explore the anguish of the people. Aijaz Ahmad in his thought provoking book *In Theory* expresses these concerns that the postcolonial writers are concerned with how one can “free oneself from stable identities of class, nation and gender” (271). A large number of postcolonial writings trace the aspirations which Aijaz Ahmad has highlighted.

Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children* deconstructs the effects of colonialism on the Indian minds. “The novel takes up one of the English novel’s central concerns of inheritance and suggests that colonialism forever disrupted India’s narrative, personal, political, and cultural beginnings” (Walkowitz 232). Another significant novel, *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh points out the effect of Colonialism and freedom struggles in India. V.S. Naipaul has also delineated the effects of postcolonialism and orientalist thought on the citizens of the third world. His protagonist Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* faces the effects of migration in this postcolonial world. “To be Portuguese living in Africa, to be a Caribbean man in London, to be an Indian woman married to a German man, to be a Brahmin married to a “backward” – all of these mixed-up conditions, Naipaul suggests, lead to ‘half a life’” (Walkowitz 231).

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is a Trinidad born British novelist, possesses Hindu culture and heritage and Indo-Trinidadian ethnicity. Born in 1932, he won Booker Prize in 1971 and Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. Naipaul’s writings have appeared at regular intervals throughout half a century from 1957 to 2004, amounting to around thirty titles and with several re-editions. With a long list of writings and awards to his credit, Naipaul undoubtedly claims fame on the international front. Themes of alienation, migration,

displacement, rootlessness, mockery and self-deception pervade throughout his works. Naipaul's works mainly consist of novels, short stories, and essays. He appeared at the literary front in 1957 with his comic novel, *The Mystic Masseur*.

In Naipaul's writings, there is always a resonant voice that is of "an area of darkness" (Nixon 67). In most of his writings, colonists come and conquer, empires rise and fall, new societies emerge, but darkness always remains an integral part of colonial and postcolonial lives possessing the false hopes of assimilation. Naipaul has candidly penned down the experiences of his own life. Rob Nixon, in his well-known critique of Naipaul *London Calling V.S. Naipaul Post-Colonial Mandarin* says

Naipaul's familial and personal displacements figure so boldly in both his work and its critical reception that he has come to be celebrated as the ultimate literary partied, the most comprehensively uprooted of twentieth-century writers and the most bereft of national affiliations. (17)

His displacements and burden of insurmountable estrangements in a way provides a framework for his writings. Naipaul feels estranged and alienated where ever he goes. Nanda Kishore Mishra in his article "Trajectory of Displacement: Expatriate Sensibility of Naipaul" explores "As a writer without roots, Naipaul has spared no one. He has said harsh things about Trinidad, India, America, Pakistan, and Argentina etc" (149). His abhorrence against India becomes clear when he comes back to India with the dreams which shattered completely after his revisit to India. In his early works, his appalling views about Islam are quite apparent.

The protagonist of Naipaul's *Half a Life*, Willie Somerset Chandran, is an Indian by birth, whose father is a Brahmin and mother is a Dalit. Willie Chandran has become a mouth-piece for innumerable migrants who are in the continuous process of loss. Willie and his father's irresistible desire for modernity leading to Willie's migration bequeath pain of exile and the anxiety of being a foreigner. The borrowed part of Willie's name "Somerset" (1), shows the vain efforts of the colonised people to fit themselves in the provided frames.

Alpana Mishra in her article "V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life*: A Critical Study" explores the novel as "*Half a Life* reads as a study in estrangement and inner exile" (193). *Half a Life* is a novel of displacement and identity quest of its main character Willie. Like Naipaul's many other works, this novel also has some autobiographical features. Willie is trying to find a particular identity, and certain place in the world to which he can call his own. His uprootedness and displacement is responsible for making him an exiled Indian.

Half a Life has been divided in three main chapters. The first chapter has been named as A Visit from Somerset Maugham describing the story of Willie's father's life, who himself is the narrator in this chapter, delineates the childhood and early youth of Willie. Naipaul's product of Naipaulian half-made society Willie's father, decides Willie's life and sends him to London for higher studies with the help of scholarship. The First Chapter is the name of the second chapter, which deals with Willie's experiences at London College and Notting Hill by using the technique of third person narrative. It entails significance as with the beginning of this chapter the first chapter of Willie's life begins. And the third chapter has been named as A Second Translation; it covers second and complete translation in Willie's life. Willie's passage of Africa and an unnamed island has been mapped out in this chapter. Willie realizes the actual emptiness of his life during his visit to Africa. The novel *Half a Life* ends when Willie is about forty one years old. From the third person narrative the narrative shifts to first person narrative till the end of the novel.

Its sequel *Magic Seeds* (2004) begins in Berlin where *Half a Life* ends. "IT HAD BEGUN many years before, in Berlin. Another world" (Naipaul, *Magic seeds* 1) Willie's five months in Berlin, seven to eight years in India, and his life in London forms the composition of *Magic Seeds*, announcing the very idea of Willie's life "... a setting perhaps he had not yet learned to see, he was like a man taken out of himself. He had become someone else" (Naipaul, *Magic Seeds* 3). With the use of third person narrative in this novel, it ends when Willie is of fifty two years.

Naipaul himself is a believer of the fact that identity is not given rather constructed. The name of a person more or less constructs his identity. The middle of Willie Somerset Chandran's name Somerset describes Homi Bhaba's concept of "mimicry" (90), the efforts of colonized people to be like the colonizers as in case of Indian people, they try to imitate the Britishers. Homi K. Bhaba in his *The Location of Culture* says "In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy" (90). The process of re-articulation of representation of identity just refers to mere copying of the dominated ideologies. While imitating the dominated ideologies, one can copy the other thing, but sometimes it happens at the expense of loss of one's own originality. This is what happens in the process of one's mere imitation of the Western frames. This very process of naming then leads to the process of misnaming.

Another thematic concern of the novel is the harsh effects of colonialism, especially on the minds of Indian people. In the postcolonial world, people who are once oppressed are left to

lead half-lives “Willie is the most fitting example of this halfness of life” (Vishnu 268). Almost all the characters of Naipaul are striving for the fullness and meaning of their lives. Ashwini Kumar Vishnu in his critique of *Half a Life: A Reading in Sense, Sensibility and Sensuality* relates

Percy Cato, Marcus, Graca, Ana, Sarojini, Jacinto, Ricardo, Carla, the Noronhas, the Correias, Aivaroeet. al. are all searching for the fullness of their lives. In this quest for fullness and self-realization they find themselves clamped to unforeseen situations. Having no other choices they continue to thrive on whatever comes on their way. (268)

Ultimately as all the characters of *Half a Life* have no other choice except clinging to the false hopes of assimilation. And this quest for identity and inequality defines the lives of the orient people. They always try to fit themselves in the frames of the west. But in this process they neither remain orient nor become occident. Edward Said, a well-known Palestinian American literary theorist and critic in his treatise *Orientalism* says “... neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the other”. (xii)

Postcolonial discourses talk about the location of culture. “In every country of the world there are climbers, “the ones who forget who they are,” and, in contrast to them, “the ones who remember where they came from” (Fanon 24). Willie is not able to get solace, first in his own hometown. Then his efforts of befitting himself in foreign cultures proved useless. His relations with borrowed girlfriends Serafina, June and Gracie, the wife of the new manager are very much shorter lived. His relations with Graca create complexities in his life. Ana comes to know about it. It sets another background for his homelessness. In this process he really forgets what Fanon calls who he is. Willie says

When Ana came to the hospital courage came to me, and I told her I wanted to divorce her. When she came back later I said to her, “I am forty one. I am tired of living your life.” “You wanted it, Willie. You asked. I had to think about it” (227).

When Willie asks Ana about the divorce, she realizes that she cannot decide it immediately. But one thing is certain that both of them are not happy with each other. Willie, Percy Cato, Ana, Willie’s father, mother, Graca, all are leading half-lives. Even those who seem to be living their own lives, such as Ana, declares that “perhaps it wasn't my life either” (227).

Willie comes to the figure of the Postcolonial migrant intellectual signifying a universal condition of hybridity. Homi K. Bhaba's view on the migrant experience in Postcolonial world can be recalled in this context:

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. (112)

Displacement itself heralds the discrimination. Willie's displacement and his mimicry of the English culture are very much like his more and more up rootedness. The title of the novel *Half a Life* is completely appropriate for describing the life of a person who moves from one place to another in the search of a particular identity and meaning of life. But he finds himself confused through the suffering of alienation. This crisis in Willie's life brings him closer to the meaning of life what Shakespeare's Macbeth has announced in Act V Scene V of the tragic play *Macbeth*

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (57)

Macbeth's complaint about the transience and nastiness of life is like Willie's complains against life, who himself is not leading his own life rather the borrowed one. Ana is also like an extension of Willie's own image. In the company of Willie, she also leads a half-life or hopes to borrow a life, and never to live the life to the full. Firstly Willie's father, his mother, then Willie in India and later on in London and in Africa, even Ana, being *a mixed caste person* and Graca, all are leading dual lives or are caught between two identities. The *half-lives* of all these characters of the novel fully substantiate the title of the novel.

The title *Half a Life*, is justified not only because Willie is close to fifty when he leaves Ana and Africa, but also because, as he tells Ana, he spent all his mature years trying to grab a life he could call his own, in the knowledge that the life that was given to him had become unbelievable. (Nayak 260)

The half journey of Willie's life, the half completion of his objectives of life, as he wants to be a writer but it is also half fulfilled, all these halves constitutes Willie's life "... the narration, divided in the middle, clearly demonstrates how Willie's half-a-life ends almost in the middle of the book, in the middle of his life at forty-one" (Colon 178). Thus the title of the novel becomes completely resonant for describing the lives caught in duality and zilch.

Arvind Adiga, a well-known Journalist and Indian writer in English, in his debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) "presents the crude, dark and naked facts about India" (Khan 84). M Q

Khan, Former Vice-Chancellor, Berhampore University, Orissa, in his article “*The White Tiger: A Critique*” writes “We are introduced to the poverty of rural Bihar and the evil of the feudal landlords” (84). Adiga’s protagonist, Balram, no doubt, differs from Naipaul’s Willie but both the novels uncover Indian poverty and class struggles. M Q Khan further in his article says “Although Naipaul’s account appears as one of outsider’s views on India, while Adiga’s accounts becomes that of an insider’s view of India... while Naipaul’s experiences in India are expressed through a global lens, Adiga looks at things purely from the Indian angle” (92).

Naipaul’s protagonist shares a common feeling of alienation with many protagonists of now days. J. M. Coetzee’s *Youth* also has the same protagonist as Naipaul’s Willie is alienated from the society he inherits, and the culture in which he tries to assimilate himself. “One of the most striking similarities between Naipaul’s main character Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* and John, the autobiographical figure in Coetzee’s *Youth*, is that they are in a constant state of alienation from their feelings” (Dooley 74). Willie falls in love so many times, but his feeling of alienation leads his inability to feel that he belongs to anywhere and even with anyone else. In *Youth* John faces the same problems. He also feels alienated from the society and is not able to share amiable relations with his girlfriends. “If John returns to South Africa he will be stifled, but if Willie returns to India he will return to nothing: to a life of blankness and meaningless ritual” (Dooley 79).

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